

Returning home from a combat zone may be a difficult transition for many of our armed servicemen and women. Family members and/or friends may be the first ones to notice the changes in their loved ones and are often unsure what to do or where to find help.

If you are worried that a returning serviceman or woman may harm him or herself due to depression or difficulty adjusting to civilian life, please call the:

Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1 800 273 TALK (8255).

Trained crisis center staff is available to offer:

Suicide intervention and

Mental health referral information.

You may have heard of a mental health disorder called post-traumatic stress disorder, often referred to as “PTSD.” This condition afflicts some of our armed servicemen and women and should be treated as soon as possible. In the past, this condition was sometimes referred to as “shell shock,” “battle or combat fatigue,” or “a soldier’s heart.” Trauma may result from combat experiences, sexual assaults, natural disasters, or accidents. Older veterans may also experience these symptoms for the first time later on in life because the condition is sometimes “delayed.”

You may have noticed your loved one showing signs of:

Anger

Anxiety or nervousness

Chronic pain

Confusion

Paranoia or constantly being on guard

Denial or avoidance of certain activities or memories

Dependence

Depression

Eating disorders

Flashbacks of traumatic events

Fear

Grief

Guilt

Isolation or pulling away from you

Jumpiness/ edginess or irritability

Loneliness

Low self-esteem

Sleep disturbance and nightmares

Substance abuse (such as drinking too much alcohol)

What you may expect from the returning veteran/ reservist:

Expect some change in your loved one after combat experience. Living in a combat zone may make one overly sensitive to noise, crowds, dangers, and sudden changes.

For instance, big surprise parties are often difficult events for returning servicemen and women. Although your intention is to please your loved one, and you would like the returning veteran or

reservist to know how glad you are to have him/ her back home, a surprise party can cause some fear and anxiety. Why? First, surprises can startle people. Imagine if you had to deal with explosions or gunfire on a regular basis with no warning. You may also startle easily and not recover as quickly.

Secondly, readjusting to civilian life can take time and patience. Expecting your loved one to be able to celebrate and cheer may be too much upon first returning from a combat zone. Witnessing repeated scary events and then returning to “normalcy” is not always easy. A period of transition is helpful.

In the same way, planning an outing to a crowded park or shopping area can be overwhelming. See yourself walking through a crowd in a foreign, hostile environment in which anyone may be the enemy at any time and with no warning. You may also start to feel on guard all the time. A car backfiring may start to sound like a weapon. A helicopter overhead may sound threatening. Even though you may have returned home, your mind and body may mix up where you are at first.

Quiet times with a couple of people who won't pry into the veteran's experience may be helpful. On the other hand, be open to listen to your loved one tell you about his/ her memories. In this way, you are providing important support.

Realizing that your loved one may not feel as safe sleeping as he/ she once did will prepare you for night time stress. Make sure your doors and windows can and do lock to help your loved one feel a little more secure.

Both the VA Medical Center and the Vet Center provide services and education to veterans and their families dealing with these types of problems. We offer groups for significant others as well as family therapy.